

## **Transformation of Chinese Cultural Values in the Era of Globalization: Individualism and Chinese Youth**

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This paper is a study of Chinese cultural values in transformation focusing specifically on the individualization of Chinese youth. The purposes of the study are to find out to what extent Chinese youth have become individualized and in what way(s) they have become individualized. The study is conducted diachronically by analyzing debates that lasted for twenty years from 1980 to 2000 organized by *Chinese Youth*, one of the best received magazines in China. The Chinese youth in this study have discovered their “self,” with a strong sense of independence, autonomy, self-responsibility, and self-realization, expressing a strong orientation towards individualism.

The People’s Republic of China has undergone drastic changes in the past 30 years of reform since the late 1970s, and is deeply involved in the process of globalization. As Schell and Shambaugh (1999) asserted, “No nation in modern history has undergone as total a transformation as has China during the quarter century” (p. 126). In this great transformation, the most obvious change is the shift from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. While there is a continued focus on China’s stunning economic growth in the past three decades, this paper argues that an equally profound change is occurring today—the individualization of the Chinese people, especially the educated youth. Though this kind of transformation occurred in the early 20th century, it is during the past three decades that this change has become one of the most significant ones in modern China.

To understand the individualization of Chinese educated youth, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the origins of individualism in the developed Western countries, which have already moved into a “post-modern” period, and then to cross-culturally compare the individualization in the West with that in China. By comparing the individualism in the West and the emergent individualism in China, we can have a better understanding of what the Chinese youth are like today. This paper explores value changes of Chinese youth towards individualistic orientation by analyzing the debates that lasted for 20 years in a popular Chinese magazine, *Chinese Youth*. The first two sections deal with a literature review of individualism in the West and holism in China. The third section is the methodology and analysis of the debates that were held by *Chinese Youth* from 1980 to 2000. The last section is the conclusion, which summarizes three characteristics of individualism valued by Chinese youth.

### Individualization in the West

According to Lukes (1984), the process of individualization in the West can be divided into two phases, ambiguous individualism and unambiguous individualism. In the first phase, collectivism was the mainstream ideology in society as most people held to communal and

family values. In the second phase, individualization made huge inroads, and individualism has become the mainstream of society. These two categories are useful tools for understanding individualization in the West. Nonetheless, the distinctions are valuable. We can see how individualization in the West is mainly displayed through a process of emancipation from God (the Church), from the state (authority), and from the family.

#### *Ambiguous Individualism in the European Era*

Individualist ideas emerged early in the West, but they did not convey the same connotation as they do today (Allik & Realo, 2004). Those ideas are often described as “ambiguous” for reasons which will be made clear below. The Greek Sophists of the 5th century B.C. are usually believed to be the first individualist philosophers. To them, the individual could decide how to debate without following the norms of his/her in-group, and in this light he/she argued for broader recognition of different paths to success (Triandis, 1995). Individualism/collectivism themes were already apparent in Plato’s Republic and individualistic values in Sophists’ teaching (Darwish & Huber, 2003). This, however, is only one component of “individualism” we use today. Its development was a long process, and it was not until the early 17th century that the concept of individualism started to be applied more and more to the human person (Girard, 1999).

When Western Europe was the center of the capitalist world, the word “individualism” was ambiguous, and there were quite different, even opposing interpretations of individualism. Some endowed to it concepts like uniqueness, originality, and self-realization (development), while others associated it with dignity, autonomy, and liberty. Within the former group the most important were the Romantics and the Liberals. The Romantics turned individualism into a cohesive philosophy, making notions such as self-realization and self-development popular and influential (Hayek, 1949).

To Charles Taylor (1996), individualism is a belief in the priority of individual sovereignty in relation to society, one which contains serious problems. It must simultaneously function as a moral ideal while being recognized as an amoral phenomenon. In his well-known book *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor emphasizes the negative results of individualism through his three “malaises about modernity: the first fear is about what we might call a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom” (Taylor, 1996, p. 10).

With these three malaises, Taylor (1996) argues, individualism flattens and narrows the contexts that give meaning and significance to human life, representing the “dark side of individualism.” “People are increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out,” and as a result, “fragmentation arises” (pp. 112-113). Individuals are more and more confined to Weber’s “the iron cage” of technology, bureaucracy and the instrumental forms of reason; authenticity is lost in this “culture of narcissism.”

This all serves to show how many Western thinkers have emphasized one aspect of individualism or another, and have written in opposition to other approaches claiming to pursue the same principle; Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill are two examples.

Constant, the most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy, sought to defend “liberty in everything, in religion, in philosophy, in literature, in industry, in politics,” because “everything which does not interfere with order; everything which belongs only to the inward nature of man, such as opinion; everything which, in regard to industry, allows the free exercise of rival industry—is individual and cannot legitimately be subjected to the power of society” (Lukes, 1984, p. 64). Meanwhile, Constant strongly criticized individualism, even grouping it with egoism, observing, “When all are isolated by egoism, there is nothing but dust, and at the advent of a storm, nothing but mire” (Lukes, 1984, p. 12).

For Mill, “the only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it” (Mill, 1975, p. 14). However, Mill (1975) also wrote, “It is the principle of individualism, competition, each one for himself and against all the rest. It is grounded on opposition of interests, not harmony of interests, and under it every one is required to find his place by a struggle, by pushing others back or being pushed back by others” (p. 715).

Other examples include Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber. De Tocqueville thought that individualism is “of democratic origin,” while observing that individualism “disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and drew apart with his family and friends.” At first it “saps only the virtues of public life; but, in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others and is eventually absorbed into pure egoism” (De Tocqueville, 1996, p. 105). For Weber, individualism, especially economic individualism as a doctrine, is a systematic pursuit of profit maximization, which Weber called “rational economic conduct” (1958, p. 27). He believed that individualism was one of the most important attributes of modern capitalism, and that economic individualism had one of its origins in religious individualism, represented by Calvinism. However, Weber argued, individualism could gradually disappear with the spread of bureaucracy and rational capitalism.

All the above mentioned represents the “ambiguity” of individualism in this period, when society was less modernized than today and individualism as a doctrine was still viewed with widespread suspicion. Just as collectivism was never absolute in China, individualism was never so in the West. Each thinker provided qualifications and criticisms of the ideal, although in the end, it was upheld as a viable principle on which to order society and guide its development. Prior to the American era, conservatism and socialism attacked individualism as a doctrine that encouraged selfishness and social conflict. On balance more people tried to defend individual rights rather than selfishness (Bullock & Trombley, 1999). Some regarded it as the basis of human society; yet others described it as only useful once capitalism had been swept away. Individualism remained an ambiguous but central concept.

#### *Unambiguous Individualism in the American Era*

During the debates over what individualism was, a change took place. Thinkers in the West continued to recognize that it was still conflicting in many ways, and even continued to disagree on exactly what it was; but more and more—even at a philosophical level—it was accepted as the best of all possible worlds. As Lukes observed, “Individualism became a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance, expressing all that has been implied

in the philosophy of natural rights, the belief in free enterprise, and the American dream” (Lukes, 1984, p. 26). Meanwhile, this was reflected throughout the dominant ideology of the United States, as well as popular culture there, and in other advanced countries throughout the globe. If individualism retained its ambiguity, its moral, ideological and psychological ambiguities had largely disappeared (Lukes, 1984). It was, in this sense, unambiguous for the first time.

Yehoshua Arieli (1964), in *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, expressed the idea somewhat differently:

Individualism supplied the nation with a rationalization of its characteristic attitudes, behavior patterns and aspirations. It endowed the past, the present and the future with the perspective of unity and progress...Above all, individualism expressed the universalism and most characteristic of the national consciousness. This concept evolved in contradistinction to socialism, the universal and messianic character of which it shared. (p. 345)

The word “unambiguous” is used here in a relative sense, that is, when compared with previous periods of Western history. There are, nonetheless, claims today that individualism is under renewed attack. John Dewey (1962) anticipated this in the 1930s when he wrote “The United States has steadily moved from an earlier pioneer individualism to a condition of dominant corporateness” (p. 36). “The development of a civilization that is outwardly corporate—or rapidly becoming so—has been accompanied by a submergence of the individual” (Dewey, 1962, p. 51).

William H. Whyte identified the “organization man” amidst a society different from the capitalism of the early 20th century. He saw a major shift from the Protestant ethic of the 19th century to what he called the “social ethic” of the 20th century. The major propositions of the social ethic are a belief in the group as the source of creativity, “belongingness” as the ultimate need of the individual and the “application of science to achieve this belongingness” (Whyte, 1957, p. 7). With this new ethic, the United States entered into “the era of the team player and the good guy, of family togetherness and the airtight security risk, of the well-rounded personality and the yes-man, of the happy homemaker and the well-adjusted child” (Leinberger & Tucker, 1991, p. 10).

However, this does not mean that a new form of collectivism was dominating American society. To be sure, some Americans, because of a variety of reasons such as economic depression and wars, were more communalistic than usual. However, terms like “communalism,” “the social ethic,” and “organization” can easily lead people to a misunderstanding that the “national ideology” of the United States was not individualism, but a sort of collectivism or communalism (Brown, 1993). But it must be understood that anything approaching an “American communalism” or “social ethic” is fundamentally different from the kinds of collectivism/holism in pre-capitalist Europe, and in the Chinese context. In the United States, communalism is something built atop the sovereign individual, and not the other way around. This marks a fundamental break from a collectivist society or ideology.

Briefly, collectivism/holism holds that the group—family, clan, community, and country—is the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value. In collectivism, the various groups to which one belongs determine one's identity. One's identity is constituted essentially in relationships with others, and the individual interest is always subordinate to the interest of his/her group. In contrast, in the United States, even in the 1930s, an adult American always sees himself/herself as an individual independent from any groups, either his/her family or the institution for which he/she works (Dumont, 1986). He/she is working for IBM today, but could be an employee at GM tomorrow. One belongs to no one else but one's self. Thus, one's individual interest is always more important than the group's, because he/she does not accept any group as his/her life-long group, and refuses to act as a subject to that group.

In the history of the United States, the emphasis on the individual, individual freedom, individual autonomy, and the rights of the individual has remained strong. Ralph Waldo Emerson remembered the era before the Civil War as a time when, "social existence gave way to the enlargement and independency of the individual...driven to find all his resources, hopes, rewards, society and deity within himself" (Bode & Cowley, 1981, p. 76). Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the early activists in the American feminist movements of the late 19th century, maintained that woman, like man, was ultimately the "arbiter of her own destiny," and must rely on her own inner resources for self-realization and the "full development of her faculties" (Foner, 1998, p. 81).

In the book *Give Me Liberty*, published in 1998, Gerry Spence claimed, "The simple truth is that each of us is unique. And because we are unique, we cannot be compared with any other person. And because we cannot be compared with any other person, we are perfect" (p. 117).

Unambiguous individualism arose in the United States when the term was freed of its negative connotations for state and society alike. What is more, when American history is compared with that of Europe, Africa or Asia, individualism has always played a surprisingly stronger role, so much so that thinkers like De Tocqueville made their careers by informing a curious Europe of it. American society was founded on the value of the individual, and the engine of that country has been fuelled and accelerated by the cultural value and practice of individualism.

How to define American individualism? In the early 20th century Herbert Hoover gave a presidential interpretation:

Our individualism differs from all others because it embraces these great ideals: that while we build our society upon the attainment of the individual, we shall safeguard to every individual an equality of opportunity to take that position in the community to which his intelligence, character, ability, and ambition entitle him; that we keep the social solution free from frozen strata of classes; that we shall stimulate effort of each individual to achievement; that through an enlarging sense of responsibility and understanding we shall assist him to attainment; while he in turn must stand up to the emery wheel of competition. (Hoover, n.d.)

If Hoover's interpretation is somewhat exalted, then Dewey provided a description in a more mundane way:

For what should they work if not for money and how should they get goods and enjoyments if not by buying them with money—thus enabling someone else to make more money, and in the end to start shops and factories to give employment to still others, so that they can make more money to enable other people to make more money by selling goods—and so on indefinitely. So far all is for the best on the best of all possible cultures: our rugged—or is it ragged?—individualism. (Dewey, 1962, p. 10)

Individuals embracing individualism involve the self as a unique and interdependent entity. Geertz (1975), for example, described the individualistic self as:

A bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, dynamic centre of awareness, emotions, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and sets contrastively both against other such wholes and against social and natural background. (p. 56)

Owing to the great success of the United States in economy, science and technology, and owing to the international influence of American culture empowered by its economy and military forces, individualism has become the mainstream value of the capitalist world and is becoming the “global value” after the Cold War. Thus, individualization has become a trend in the whole world.

#### Holism/Collectivism in China

In order to have a better understanding of the significance of individualization, we need a clear comprehension of the historical and ideological context in which this individualization has occurred in China. Holism/collectivism is a major dimension of cultural variability used to explain differences and similarities across cultures and a dominant value in many societies, insofar as they place more emphasis on the whole rather than on the parts. Holism/collectivism generally refers to situations in which people are obliged to various groups (such as the family, clan, work unit, and country) and to the common good rather than to one's self, and are expected to sacrifice personal interests for whatever the wider interests may be (also associated with terms such as the common good, order, harmony, duty, and often equality).

#### *China's Holistic History*

Holism as a philosophical view originated from the idea of “unity/harmony of heaven/nature and man” (Tang, 2005), which was established not only as world view but also as a mold of thinking, and it was well developed by many ancient Chinese philosophers,

thinkers and scholars such as Confucius, Lao Zi, Mencius, Dong Zhongshu and so on.

In traditional Chinese culture, holism is a dominant world view and value which claims that the whole cannot be taken apart and that every apparent whole can be understood only in the context of the larger whole of which it is a part. Parts exist only within wholes, to which they have inseparable relations. What should be stressed here are two points: first, the holistic viewpoint of Chinese philosophy usually places more emphasis on the whole rather than on the parts. Second, the parts are interdependent and inter-related rather than independent or autonomous as the Western worldviews do, since they are inseparable from the whole. These are two principles of the holistic ideology in ancient China. The holistic worldview was best illustrated by Wei (1996), who, while comparing the worldview between the East and the West, stated that the East sees the cosmos as a self-operating system not controlled by an external system as it is in the West. According to him, the view in the East is one of a “harmoniously functioning organism consisting of an orderly hierarchy of interrelated parts and forces which, though unequal in their status, are equally essential for the total process” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 41).

Mainstream Chinese values can be traced back to legendary rulers like Yao and Shun<sup>1</sup>, who ruled in the 3rd millennium B.C., and who were greatly enriched and systematized by Confucius and his followers. According to *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius transmitted the ancient traditions of Yao and Shun, and he modeled after and made brilliant the systems of King Wen and King Wu (founders of the Zhou dynasty, 1100-221 B. C.). He conformed to the cyclical or holistic order of nature that governs the revolution of the seasons in heaven above, and followed the principles that governs the lands and water below. What is more, Confucius extended the idea of unity of man and nature to the establishment of harmony between/among men in the society. In establishing such harmonious society, relationship and group orientation are predominant. With these orientations in operation in the society, harmonious relationship and the goals of the group or the collective take precedence over those of the individual. As a matter of fact, Confucianism was established as the “national ideology” in the early Han dynasty and it became the orthodox ideology till the mid 20th century when the People’s Republic of China was founded.

Side by side with Confucianism is the second mainstream philosophy—Daoism. Though it was never officially “appointed” as a national ideology, Daoism was more widely accepted in ancient China. If Confucianism was a philosophy especially for intellectuals, for the cultivation of the “superior person,” then Daoism was a philosophy for all people, from ruler and sage to the ordinary people. In traditional China, Confucianism was usually practiced by those who were young, educated, and successful, whereas Daoism played a more important role in the life of those who were middle aged or older, those who were having difficulties, or ordinary people experiencing suffering. Confucianism was the philosophy of the smart, the ambitious, and the able, whereas Daoism was usually used to comfort those who were defeated, mistreated, or who had no advantage in wisdom, ability, and in reality. There is an old saying in China: when successful, be a Confucianist; and when in a disadvantageous situation, be a Daoist. In reality, the successful, the smart and the elite are the few, while those with ordinary ability, who are in trouble, and who do not have a chance to taste success are always the majority. No matter if they were utilized by rulers, or were spontaneously loved by

ordinary people, both Confucianism and Daoism were essentially holistic (Ancient Chinese Philosophies, n.d., para. 18). From Lao Zi's *Dao De Jing* we can find a holistic view in Daoism.

### *Holistic Doctrines in Confucianism*

Living in a time of civil chaos in China, Confucius was preoccupied with how to bring about order (*da zhi*) in the country and harmony (*da xie*) in human relations. These two interdependent goals (social order and harmony) are the essence of holistic Confucianism.

To Confucius, standards had deteriorated and people were not living up to their ideals. All would be improved if each person knew clearly his role in family and in society, and then worked more conscientiously to fulfill this role. The goal was harmony and order in both family and society; this tradition had been kept for more than 20 centuries (Tang, 2005). According to this tradition; as the member of a family, a clan, and a country, one should always put family, clan, and country first.

Confucius advocated achieving social order by establishing harmony in society. Then how did he actualize this goal? He tried to establish a hierarchical social order by establishing what are called the five relationships. First, people should be helped to know their social positions or social roles so that they will be expected to do what is appropriate according to the social positions and roles ascribed to them. Confucius identified five key relationships in society: between ruler and the ruled, father and son, husband and wife, brother and brother, neighbour and neighbour. In the words of Confucius, "The ruler should behave as a ruler; the official should behave as an official; the father as a father; the son as a son." In the time of Confucius, rulers, officials, fathers and sons failed to behave as expected, so the country was in disorder. He argued that the most important and most urgent thing to do was to "*zheng ming*" (rectify names), to behave as a person of certain recognized status is expected for people to do. Confucius persuasively stressed, "If names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then things cannot be accomplished. If things cannot be accomplished, then ceremonies and music will not flourish. If ceremonies and music do not flourish, then punishment will not be just. If punishments are not just, then the people will not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore the superior person (*jun zi*) will give only names that can be described in speech and say only what can be carried out in practice" (Chan, 1973, p. 40). In short, if everyone behaves as expected, there will be good relationships among people and harmony in society.

### *Holism in Daoism*

The word "Daoism" comes from *Dao De Jing* (classic of the way and virtues), the "Bible" of Daoism. The alleged founder of Daoism and the author of the classic is Lao Zi, a legendary figure in Chinese history. With only 5000 Chinese characters, *Dao De Jing* covers almost all the important social, political, and philosophical concepts such as *dao*—the law or principle of nature, *de* (virtue), *zhi* (governance), and *bian* (dialectics). It was also a response to some important social, political, and philosophical issues two and a half millennia ago in

China. Compared with many other classics, its view is broader, its analysis deeper, its topics more versatile, its perspectives more special, its language more brilliant, and its arguments more insightful.

Many Western scholars describe Daoism as a theory about individualism, at least compared with Confucianism. In *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Daoist Values* edited by Donald J. Munro (1985), almost all the authors emphasized the individualistic features of Daoism. An alternative interpretation takes Daoism, on the whole, to be a holistic philosophy. This can be seen in several key respects. Firstly, it focuses on the whole, not the parts. This is one of the basic features of Lao Zi's Daoism. Throughout the book, wholeness is the key word. "*Dao*" is specially discussed in 29 of the 81 chapters and repeatedly used 55 times, and most other chapters can also be regarded as further explanations and illustrations of *Dao*. What is *Dao*? *Dao* is the law of the universe. *Dao* is the whole. *Dao* is the origin of the world. In the words of Lao Zi, "*Dao* produced the one. The one produced the two. The two produced the three. And the three produced the whole world." Obviously, "one" is the whole, not the parts.

Another word referring to this wholeness is "*wu*" (nonbeing). In the philosophy of Lao Zi, *wu* is not nothing, or no-existence, but rather an origin of everything. As Lao Zi asserted, "All things in the world come from being. And being comes from nonbeing." The nameless (*wu ming*) is the origin of heaven and earth. At the same time, *wu* is a key to understanding the world from the perspective of Daoism. *Wu* usually implies not emptiness or scarcity but a superlative degree of being. Zhuang Zi stressed this argument too, "Great *Dao* has no appellation. Great speech does not say anything. Great humanity is not humane. Great modesty is not yielding. Great courage does not injure" (Ancient Chinese Philosophies, n.d., para. 11).

On the other hand, it is *wu* (nonbeing), not *you* (being) that forms the useful part of the real world, "Clay is molded into a utensil, but it is on its nonbeing that the utility of the utensil depends. Doors and windows are cut out to make a room, but it is on its nonbeing that the utility of the room depends." So the central idea of Lao Zi in his *Dao De Jing* is not individualistic, but holistic.

#### Methodology and Analysis of the Debates in *Chinese Youth*

##### *Methodology*

Content analysis is applied in this study. The debates/discussions organized by *Chinese Youth* from 1980 to 2000 vividly illustrate a historic transformation, from collective ideology to individualistic thinking, and from traditional holistic values to modern individualistic values. This paper examines these debates in a context of past and present, traditional and modern by analyzing the opinions of readers (participants) during 20 years of the debates that can be classified into five periods. We intend to demonstrate that Chinese youth have become significantly individualistic; and that individualization challenges the traditional values.

Table: Debates of five periods in *Chinese Youth*

Period of Time	Central Topic of Debates
1980.5 – 1980.12	Why is the road of life becoming narrower and narrower?
1981.4 – 1984.1	From Pan Xiao to Zhang Haidi
1985.5 – 1988.1	Becoming rich versus becoming intelligent
1989.7 – 1992.1	Orthodox restoration
1992.3 – 2000.7	Lost between ideals and reality

### *Analysis of the Debates*

There were altogether about 20 debates/discussions initiated and organized by *Chinese Youth* in 20 years. They could be divided into five periods according to the nature of the debates.

*Pan Xiao Debate (No. 5, 1980—No. 12, 1980)*. This debate, usually known as the “Pan Xiao Debate,” was the first important debate focusing directly on the central topic, “the meaning of life,” and was the first one in which Chinese youth, as individuals, openly expressed their ideas and feelings, directly challenging the traditional cultural values.

The debate was initiated by a reader’s letter to *Chinese Youth*, written by Pan Xiao. The letter told a touching story of the author’s own experience and perplexities: how she, a 23-year-old girl, had cherished the communist ideal when she was young; how she became lost in the Great Cultural Revolution and was shocked by what had happened; how she tried to seek the meaning of life; and how disappointed and frustrated she had become. More important, the author posed a thought-provoking question, “Why is the road of life becoming narrower and narrower?”

To provide a more objective picture, and to help us understand why the letter was so powerful and stirring, we have translated the letter as follows:

In order to seek the meaning of life, I consulted with many... But no one gave me a persuasive explanation. What do we live for? To live for the sake of the revolutionary cause? It seems to me that this is too shallow and unreachable, and I hate to listen to that kind of orthodox propaganda any more. To live for gaining fame and reputation? That is too hard for most of common people... To live for the benefit of the whole of humankind? This is not true in real life... To live just for eating, drinking, playing and pleasure? That is really meaningless and boring.

In the past, I firmly believed, “We live to make others live better.” “One should devote his/her life without hesitation to serving the people.” Such a belief is absurd to me now.

I’ve gradually come to an understanding: everyone, no matter what he/she is doing, is working just to make basic living or inventing something new (to benefit society) and he/she is working subjectively for himself/herself, but objectively for others. Just

like the sunshine, it is the natural phenomenon of the sun, but objectively it benefits the earth.

Some people say that our age is progressing, but I cannot see where the progress is; some other people claim that we live for a great cause, but I don't know where the cause is. Ah! The road of life, why is it becoming narrower and narrower? I am tired now, really tired!

Such an honest and open-minded expression had not appeared in Chinese newspapers and magazines for many years. The letter was a critique of the out-of-date political education, a challenge to the orthodox outlook on life, and a cry for individual values that had been suppressed for a long time.

After Pan Xiao's letter was published in issue No. 5 on May 11, 1980, the editorial office began receiving letters from readers. From May 17 onwards, they received more than 100 letters each day. By May 27, they were getting around 1,000 letters each day. By June 9 the editorial office had received more than 20,000 letters commenting on Pan Xiao's letter, a national record.

In response, *Chinese Youth* submitted a 6000-character report to the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and announced the end of the debate in its No. 12 issue. However, it was not so easy to end the debate, which had awakened previously dormant views that would soon gain official sanction, even though the period immediately following would see a "socialist counterattack" in the person of an officially recognized model, Zhang Haidi.

*Zhang Haidi: A New Model (No. 4, 1981—No. 1, 1984)*. Owing to the special situation, *Chinese Youth* did not organize a debate on "the meaning of life" till late 1983. However, the discussion on "Why are models often isolated and mistreated?" (Issue No. 6, 1981 to issue No. 1, 1982) indirectly revealed a fact that people did not like, and could not endure, the orthodox role models. Obviously, the reform age needed new models, which counteract the emphasis on individualism spread by the Pan Xiao debate, yet could also lead people in the right direction. On March 8, 1983, "Challenging Fate: a Report on an Outstanding Youth League Member, Zhang Haidi," was published in *People's Daily*. This long report about a severely paralyzed 28-year-old woman Zhang Haidi, written by Liu Binyan, a well-known senior reporter at *People's Daily*, provided Chinese youth with a good opportunity to create a politically acceptable role model.

The official image of Zhang Haidi as the embodiment of a new Lei Feng consisted of three interrelated aspects—the persistent pursuit of knowledge, using her knowledge and skills to serve society, and being a "superwoman." It was reported that Zhang was eager to pursue knowledge and successfully taught herself medicine, acupuncture, classical literature, and foreign languages, including English, German, and Japanese. These achievements were by no means easy for ordinary people. It must have been unbelievably hard for a woman with two thirds of her body paralyzed. Zhang's persistent pursuit of knowledge rightly met the needs of the government. The Chinese government was eager to find a suitable role model.

Zhang tried her best to use her knowledge and skills to help people and serve the society. It was reported that she successfully tutored many young people learning foreign languages, and several of them had become university students by the time she became famous in early 1983. She relieved many patients from pain and suffering with her acupuncture skills, although she, herself, was in much more serious pain and suffering. The editorial that appealed to all young people to learn from Zhang, proclaimed: “The priority of her consideration is the need of society, which becomes the dynamic for her progress and is the goal of life for her.”

In a long article, “Emancipate Yourself from Your Small Self,” Zhong Peizhang provided a vivid picture of enthusiasm for individualization. In this period, beginning with the advocacy of Zhang Haidi to the reserved discussion on the “outlook on life,” the old orthodox ideas were powerfully propagated. In spite of this official endeavor, however, Chinese youth were not converted back to the mainstream ideology. Their interest and attention had been changing from more abstract ideals to a more pragmatic world, from debates about group versus individual values to discussions about achievements of individuals.

*Becoming Rich vs. Becoming Intelligent* (No. 5, 1985—No. 1, 1988). If “learning from Zhang Haidi” in the previous period was an official endeavor to counteract individualization, then in this period individualization had obviously been deepening. Zhang Haidi, honored as a new Lei Feng, was quite different from Lei Feng, since she was accepted not because of her loyalty to the Party, or her altruism, but because she was a super person based on her reported achievements. By the mid 1980s, in spite of endeavors of the government, young people had shifted their focus from ideological questioning about ideals to practical thinking about personal achievements.

From issue No. 5 to issue No. 9 in 1985, *Chinese Youth* organized a discussion on a thought-provoking topic, “Is becoming rich better than becoming intelligent?” Li Jiang, a nurse in Xinjiang province, wrote a letter discussing one of the most noticeable social problems: the first group of rich people in the reform era did not have professional skills and better education, and were comparatively less educated. As a result, the importance of knowledge (advocated by the state) and of education (a traditional value) was seriously challenged by a new pursuit of becoming rich. People complained that the income of atomic bomb developers (representatives of the better educated sector) could not be favorably compared to peddlers selling boiled tea eggs (representatives of new businessmen with little education). Making money became a popular phenomenon in China at that time, and many who had a better education psychologically suffered in terms of their lower incomes.

Li was a well-trained nurse, but her income was much lower than that of her friends who only had a middle school education but now were doing business. In the following four months *Chinese Youth* received more than a thousand letters on this issue and Li herself also received over one hundred letters. The ideas expressed in these letters can roughly be brought into the following groups:

1. Something is more important than money, such as reputation and progress in one's studies or career.
2. We should seek both knowledge and money. There is no contradiction between them.
3. Becoming intelligent is no doubt less beneficial to oneself than becoming rich.
4. Becoming rich also requires talent.

The debate was finally concluded in issue No. 9 when Li claimed that she had found the answer. In her second letter to *Chinese Youth*, she wrote, "Our society will be more and more competitive and knowledge-intensive, and so if people want to avoid being by-passed, learning new techniques and knowledge is a must." Therefore, she became committed to intellectual development as an essential component of her future career path.

*Restoration of Proletarian Ideology (No. 7, 1989—No. 1, 1992)*. Because of the downfall of communism in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries, 1990-1992 witnessed a restoration in *Chinese Youth*. It essentially refrained from organizing any discussions related to topics like "the meaning of life."

To support this orthodox position, in issue No. 5, 1991, *Chinese Youth* published an article based on the results of a national survey conducted between 1986 and 1990 by the Chinese Academy of Social Science. According to this article, about 70% of youth agreed on the following ideas: "The meaning of life is in devotion, not in gain." "Personal things are always small, while national affairs are always big." "If there is no water in the big river, the smaller rivers will be dry." In addition, more than half the respondents took a negative attitude to individualism. Yet despite this orthodox focus, 45.3% of people took an ambiguous and sympathetic attitude towards "selfishness," arguing that it was understandable for youth to pay more attention to personal interests, when the standard of living was not yet high.

This "restoration" of orthodox ideology was not long-lived. The country's reform engine was restarted by Deng's talks during his famous south China tour in early 1992, and the focus of *Chinese Youth* soon returned to its normal track, examining the phenomenon of individualization in the reform era.

*Lost between Ideals and Reality (No. 3, 1992—No. 7, 2000)*. As the whole country was starting a new "leap-forward" in economic reform, debates in *Chinese Youth* continued in 1992. With less interference from the authorities, *Chinese Youth* organized more open and honest debates/discussions in this period. For example, in the last period (1989-1991), *Chinese Youth* had only organized one debate; while in the first seven issues in 2000, *Chinese Youth* organized three discussions. In the debates/discussions of this period, the most important characteristic was that youth were lost between ideals and reality (money), although the government had earnestly tried to restore the official orthodox ideology. Students raised the following questions to discuss:

"*Why is Success So Far from Me?*" A letter from Li Mingyi initiated the debate that continued from issue No. 10, 1996 to issue No. 2, 1997. Li's letter entitled "Why Is Success So Far from Me, Even Though I Have Been Working Very Hard?" showed the perplexity and

disappointment of another group of youth, disadvantaged young people. Li was disadvantaged because she was born in the countryside, which meant she had to work much harder than urban youth to be just as successful. Li had failed to enter university, which for many years was the only channel of rural social mobility, apart from joining the military. Li held to a high ideal and struggled for many years, teaching herself a number of skills. Yet she always failed, even in climbing a small step on the social ladder. When she wrote the letter, she was a frustrated peddler on a street corner: "What is wrong with me? Why have I worked so hard, so honestly to pursue ideals, and tried my best to keep myself from falling, but I was repeatedly denied success and happiness?" (No. 10, 1996). Li's case was fairly representative in terms of her consistent search for ideals and her real failures due to many obstacles before her.

"Pan Xiao" also participated in this discussion. The idea in Pan's letter (written by Pan Wei, a university student 16 years ago) was interesting. He argued that it is not necessary to struggle for some particular goal, because struggle itself is our life and the goal. In addition, he made a positive comment on the social situation of 1997 compared with that of 1980. He wrote,

What young people complained about 16 years ago was that the road of life was becoming narrower and narrower; while today they complain that it is becoming too hard to succeed. One is lack of options, and the other is too many choices. This is a great change brought about by the reform. (No. 1, 1997, p. 49)

Pan's statement provided a good perspective for looking at the perplexity and disappointment of Chinese youth. They had too many choices. However, his concept that "struggle itself is our life" was hard to accept because struggle cannot be aimless, i.e. it is a means to end, but not that end itself. In issue No.1, 1998, some letters fully disclosed this problem. Pan Yunfei asked, "What are we looking for?" Lin Tao asked, "What is the spark of our youth? For what do we live for? How should we spend the most valuable part of our young life?" Chen Junhong, in his letter entitled "Keep Our Spiritual Eden," asked not without disappointment, "What should we do, when power and money get what they want, when money equals ability, when ideals belong to tomorrow, while today is the reality in which only money talks?" (No. 1, 1998, p. 42-43).

*"How to Survive and Develop?"* The contradictions between ideal and reality were further discussed in 1997, in issues No. 7 to No. 10. The discussion raised a much sharper question: Do we have to become an evil person if we want to survive and develop? The initial letter was written by a young man referred to as the "small boss." He was a young man with ideals, who believed that he could succeed. After three years of unbelievable struggle in Shenzhen, the first and most successful special economic zone, he had earned two million yuan, and went back to his hometown, where he opened a store. Soon, he became a prey for many greedy and corrupt officials. In order to survive, he did not dare to say "no" to those corrupt officials, but this bothered his conscience greatly when he had to say "yes" to them. As a result, he became confused, and was now desperately asking, "Do we have to turn

ourselves into evil people if we want to survive and develop?”

The “small boss” was disappointed and confused, but still hoped for an honest and just outcome. He traveled from the south to the editorial offices of *Chinese Youth* in Beijing and handed his letter to the editors, begging them to give him an explanation. He even claimed that he would not leave Beijing before he had an explanation. Most people thought that the events described by the “small boss” had become rather common, but that an honest person should not follow suit. This was a temporary phenomenon emerging in the early period of the socialist market economy, and the situation would change for the better as the market economy was systemized and standardized. In its concluding article, the editorial office gave an unusual “yes and no” explanation: “We should not forgive these evil phenomena, but we should pay more attention to development... However, we should stick to a principle: try our best to avoid any regrets in our life.” In issue No. 15, 1999, a similar question was put forward again: “Should we continue to be honest and good people?” which again was discussed widely, with a similar response.

“*How Can We Live Better?*” In her conversation with Wang Yaping, Yang Yanzi (the American girl) had said, “To me, it is more meaningful to discuss how to live a better life (than to debate on the meaning of life)” (No.11, 1980, p. 9). At that time, this opinion seemed quite unacceptable to Chinese youth since it was too individualistic. Twenty years later, this really had become a key question for Chinese youth. In its first issue in 2000, *Chinese Youth* put forward the question “How can we live better” for discussion. The editor’s introduction was provocative: “When the older generations thought about life, they only had one question: ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Now, we either do not think in that way, or only think about another question: ‘How can we live better?’”

The shift from ideologically and philosophically seeking the meaning of life to thinking specifically about how “I” can live better was a big step in the process of individualization. This was still the early stages of transformation, that is to say, youth couldn’t completely cut themselves loose from traditional values, although they were living in a new era, and under new circumstances. As a result, some youth became disappointed; and some were confused. Liu Hong wrote, “I have a life, but I do not know what I can do with it.” Li Xiao, a college teacher, described himself as a decadent person, “I try hard not to be decadent, but no way. Work is meaningless, love is meaningless, and everything is meaningless. What else are we looking for? With some liquor, or with a cigarette I try hard to clarify things, but there is no answer, only decadence” (No. 3, 2000, p. 10).

The letters expressed a very popular phenomenon. A whole generation appeared to be dissatisfied, and unhappy, although people’s lives were much better, both materially and spiritually than twenty years ago. Those who were most unhappy were usually “chosen ones”—university students or graduates, who either had a bright future or already had a good job. “The problem” according to the editor, “is that we do not think about what we want, we only think about how to get it.” In reality, this had become a very popular phenomenon among Chinese youth by the year 2000, especially among university students.

On May 30, 2000, a conference was held in memory of the Pan Xiao Debate organized twenty years ago. *Chinese Youth* also edited a book: *The Pan Xiao Debate: the First Voice of*

*the Chinese Youth for Ideological Transformation*. This signified official acknowledgement of the debate and of Pan Xiao's argument, "subjectively for oneself, and objectively for others." By the year 2000 the debates/discussions had differed from those in the early 1980s, as shown above. However, all the debates/discussions were closely related to the central topic: the meaning of life, no matter how the issues had changed after 20 years. Thus, the debates/discussions in *Chinese Youth* provide a 20-year history of the increasing individualization of Chinese youth in the reform era.

### Conclusion

To sum up, our study clearly indicates that Chinese educated youth have become individualized so prominently that no other previous generations would ever have imagined. It also shows that the individualization of Chinese educated youth has taken a different path, (from that of the West) and experienced three transformations—transformation of traditional values, transformation of proletarian ideology, and transformation of family consciousness. These are three characteristics of individualization in the reform era, or we call it "individualism with Chinese characteristics" that includes the following:

#### *Strong Self-Consciousness*

Chinese youth have moved from thinking about the "meaning of life" to "money or cultivation." Finally they came to the question, "How can we live better?" The consciousness of self has become stronger. As a result, "self," the most basic component in individualism, has emerged from sub-consciousness to consciousness, and from something negative to a widely accepted consideration.

#### *Focus on Materialistic Achievements*

In the reform era in China, materialistic achievements have become the focus for many people. In the debates organized by *Chinese youth* in 1985, "to be rich or to be intelligent" became a major issue. Since then materialistic achievements have become a focus in China. As our survey shows, most university students paid great attention to material interests.

#### *The Super Person Complex*

For the Chinese youth, the most popular names in China today are those who have attained individual success—stars in different fields who have become famous and materially successful, and those "top tens," such as top ten richest people in China, top ten most successful entrepreneurs, top ten most distinguished young people of the year. This super person complex is well displayed in the *Chinese Youth* debates. In the mind of today's Chinese youth, models of "super persons" have replaced "superior persons."

## Note

1. They have been regarded as the best role models, or sage kings ever since.

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